

From the Editor's Desk

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A VISION OF THE FUTURE

First, let me welcome those of you who have downloaded the *Journal* for free from the Association for Bahá'í Studies website. This milestone decision by the Executive Committee required a great deal of reflection on what is the most essential purpose of ABS in service to the Bahá'í community, to society at large, and to scholars from every field. Now there is no membership fee, no charge for reading and sharing the *Journal*, and, we feel, no limitations to the far-reaching influence of the discourses carried out in the articles published therein. So now that all have free access to the *Journal's* issues online, please share them with those whom you feel might be inspired and enlightened by the content.

My exhortation is particularly appropriate to this present issue, which I believe contains some of the most forthright and informative discussions about where we are in the global progress of the Bahá'í Faith, as well as how we can assist the world's citizens to respond to the rapidly escalating crises and tests we face as a planetary community.

Shoghi Effendi observes in the very first sentence of *The Promised Day is*

Come that a “tempest, unprecedented in its violence, unpredictable in its course, catastrophic in its immediate effects, *unimaginably glorious in its ultimate consequences*, is at present sweeping the face of the earth” (3; emphasis added). However, the principal theme and focus of the Bahá'í Faith is a vision of the future that, in spite of the present turmoil and consternation we witness and experience, is completely positive and encouraging.

Doubtless the “glorious consequences” of this promise might seem quite remote and hardly consoling in the midst of our present circumstances, as the initial stages of this tempest already feel all too overwhelming at times. Indeed, the rapid onset of the dismantling of whatever stability we might have thought we had achieved should make us strive to understand what this “glorious” outcome will be, and, of more immediate concern, what we might do to hasten and facilitate its arrival.

For Bahá'ís who are presently involved in the activities prescribed in the plans created for this very purpose by the Universal House of Justice, the roiling tempest becomes incrementally less distracting the more we focus our attention and energies on the framework and strategies for constructing vibrant and spiritually oriented communities from the ground up. These communities—purposely spread throughout the world—will in time become the global civilization that will embrace, nurture, and guide by example the collection of nation

states throughout the world. Currently, many countries are, instead, ostensibly intent on becoming increasingly more insular, less collaborative, and therefore less capable of responding effectively to the plethora of global challenges that presently confront humankind: global warming, racism, religious conflict, ideologically driven clashes of opinion and armed forces, the ever more overt and egregious demeaning of women, the exponentially widening gulf in the distribution of wealth and human resources between the few and the many, and so on.

The articles in this issue are dedicated, whether directly or indirectly, to this theme—the Bahá'í vision of a future that is by no means a vain or idealistic hope, but a concrete reality whose foundation is being constructed presently through innovative educational programs and a variety of social activities devised precisely to demonstrate in action the efficacy of the future society Bahá'u'lláh describes as a Golden Age in which humankind lives collaboratively in a single, unified commonwealth. Those who abide in this future polity—described in detail in the Bahá'í texts—will, among other things, speak a common language, write in a common script, utilize a single currency and system of weights and measures, and, most importantly, share a common belief in the essentially spiritual nature and purpose of human existence.

The two articles that open this issue focus on one of the most critical and yet widely misunderstood tenets of

the Bahá'í teachings that is a requisite for fostering the advent of this glorious future—the unity of science and religion. The first, by Farzam Arbab, who served as a member of the Universal House of Justice, is titled “The Intellectual Life of the Bahá'í Community” and is an edited transcript of the lecture he delivered at the 40th annual conference of the Association of Bahá'í Studies, held in Montreal in August 2016.

The animating goal of Arbab's discussion is the frank examination of the deficiencies in the way human thinking approaches the study of reality—especially social reality—and of what Bahá'í students and thinkers can do to respond to conflicting views by fostering several salutary methods, which he spells out in lucid terms. He points out, for example, that we need not abandon or disdain all that has been accomplished by past achievements of human learning in order to understand and apply what the Bahá'í Writings teach regarding the integration of and reciprocity between materialist theories and spiritual enlightenment.

He states that “[b]ringing spiritual and material forces to bear coherently on the life of humanity requires an intellectuality that is not easy to come by.” He explains: “We cannot, for example, subscribe to a view that the basic structures of today's society are essentially sound, that the problem is that their control has fallen into the hands of the wrong people, and that only if spiritualized people—the

kind we are trying to become—were in charge, peace and prosperity would emerge.”

Arbab also observes, profoundly, that “we cannot stand to the side and say, ‘Everything will be made new,’” though he does note that in time, strictly materialist views of reality “will fall into disrepute as breakthroughs in the understanding of the interactions between the subjective and the objective will occur,” particularly in the attempts to explain human consciousness.

He then establishes what he feels are three conditions that must accompany the attempts of future Bahá'í learning and scholarship to demonstrate conclusively the underlying unity of science and religion—conditions that are already extant, but sorely in need of recognition. The first condition he cites as necessary to the flourishing of intellectual life is the courage to question the present orthodoxy and to suggest viable alternatives. The second condition he proposes is the rejection of elitism and the embracing of a path of service “upon which multitudes are invited to walk.”

He concludes with a discussion of the third condition, a process of inquiry that, he asserts, “is needed to understand the nature of harmony between science and religion and the ways in which they complement each other in the civilization-building process.” This understanding can be accomplished, he observes, by a move among Bahá'ís to regard science not as “scientism” or as mere technology, but as “the nature

of scientific knowledge in all its power, science as the ‘first emanation from God toward man’” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 49).

To a certain extent, the second article in this issue, a rendering of the talk given on 20 May 2016 by member of the Universal House of Justice Paul Lample at the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois, focuses on this same subject, but it also explores the broader implications of the advancement of the Bahá'í community in its noble efforts to respond to the specific challenges it presently confronts as a global religion attempting to establish the strong, rational, and innovative underpinnings of a future society that can endure and prosper, even as increasingly dysfunctional and ineffectual systems rapidly decline.

Lample’s thoughtful and accessible discussion has been a source of encouragement for countless souls. This paper approaches education and enlightenment from the broader perspective of how our understanding of reality cannot be fragmented into a strictly materialist approach or a strictly spiritual or metaphysical perspective. Put simply, if reality is an integrated organic creation, then any useful study, understanding, or application of enlightenment gained from it must itself be integrative in its approach. And if the two dimensions of reality presently available for our consideration are but aspects of a single construct, then neither approach has value if dis severed from the other. Indeed, there is a reciprocity between

the material and spiritual study in public discourse that is most obviously appropriate to an understanding of our own nature. This reciprocal relationship is most obvious in the association between our spiritual essence or soul and our human temple, even as our knowledge of spiritual concepts is incomplete until demonstrated in personal comportment and social reformation, the practice of which further informs our understanding.

More specifically, the article discusses the imperative from the Bahá'í texts regarding how science must become freed from materialism even as religion must become freed from superstition. After examining the current conflict and the urgent need to resolve this false dichotomy, Lample considers how Bahá'ís might “understand and increasingly contribute to the effectuation of this principle through action and involvement in contemporary discourse.”

He begins by analyzing the irrationality of present-day global systems, whether in terms of the distribution of human resources, the construction of systems for human health and welfare, or the protection of the environment. He then proceeds to explain how the source of these dysfunctional structures—as well as every other human conflict, injustice, and deficiency—can be traced back to the lack of harmony between science and religion. Lample then gives a more detailed diagnosis of the forces afflicting humanity, one of the most grievous being religious fanaticism, which he describes as the

degeneration of religion into superstition, and the unwarranted division of the world and its peoples into the simplistic categories of good and evil.

Part and parcel of this irrational bifurcation is the simultaneous clash between fanatical and materialistic worldviews. But as the article goes on to note, the truth about reality and our need to comprehend it is not found in some middle ground, but rather in the realization that the advancement of human understanding results from a religious view based on rational exploration of the metaphysical dimension and a study of the material dimension as it is informed by, related to, and an expression of metaphysical reality.

Lample then presents the reader with an expansive examination of a strictly materialist interpretation of reality and the effects and influence that such a philosophical orientation has upon society. He next explores strides and attitudes in science that transcend reductionist materialist views of reality and the human reality in particular (the conscious mind), following this with an equally rich investigation of the influence of religion on the evolving schools of thought in anthropological and sociological studies.

He concludes with an elegant treatment of “true religion” and the “practice of true religion,” in which he discusses precisely what the Bahá'í plans are designed to do by way of community building throughout the world.

The third article, by Sona Farid-Arbab, also derives from a plenary talk from the very successful 2016

ABS conference. Related to the same theme of the relationship between religion and enlightenment as borne out in practical strategies, this article focuses on the accomplishments of the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program as an example of how the Bahá'í community can reimagine and implement innovative approaches to education in general.

The article considers both the vision in the Bahá'í texts about education in the future and what is presently being accomplished. After briefly rehearsing the obvious failure of most contemporary educational systems to assist students in becoming well-rounded, thoughtful, and productive members of society, the article looks at a Bahá'í response to this dire need.

The author describes the most basic form of this response as it is currently being translated into efforts carried out by groups of Bahá'ís and other like-minded individuals inspired by the vision and teachings of the Bahá'í Faith to create an integrative and holistic approach to education to combat the serial application of educational fads that most public schooling has become: “behaviorism a few decades ago, a combination of computationalism of the cognitive movement and culturalism interspersed by emphasis on behavioral objectives sometime later, more recently a curious mixture of constructivism and outcome-based curricula, and then whatever may be coming next.”

Farid-Arbab then discusses the Bahá'í vision of bringing forth a “new

race of men,” successive generations of individuals progressively more informed about the essential human reality and purpose and energized by the prospect of channeling that understanding into fostering an “ever-advancing civilization.” She, too, asserts that such an endeavor need not—indeed should not—abandon all that has been done in the study of education or its application to the Bahá'í concept of desired outcomes, although our goal is to “enable each generation of youth to contribute more decisively than the previous one to the construction of a new culture and a new civilization.”

The fourth article, “The Beauty of the Human Psyche” by Rhett Diessner, is, not coincidentally, a wonderful demonstration of the sort of study and application explicitly called for in the first three articles. Exploring some of the various notions of the essential human reality (the psyche or soul), Diessner lays out in very approachable and useful terms the fundamental parameters one can derive about this ephemeral reality from the authoritative Bahá'í texts.

He traces the origin of the soul—both as an emanation from God and as the entity endowed with the specialized capacity to willfully manifest all the divine attributes—and then follows the transmission of the virtues to the brain, where abstraction is transformed into manifest reality—that is, knowledge into action and, with unremitting effort, patterns of action into the spiritual transformation of the individual.

Beyond this general observation, Diessner also discusses how this spiritual process appears to take place in neuronal patterns in the physical apparatus of the brain as this most complex and refined all-material creation becomes trained by the soul itself.

The final article, by longtime contributor Anne Gordon Perry, is a succinct but valuable description of the relationship between Seattle Bahá'í art patron Anne Gould Hauberg (1917–2016) and the internationally celebrated Seattle-based painter Mark Tobey (1890–1976). During the course of this piece, Perry reveals their shared interest in both art and faith and the inextricable relationship between these two aspects of their lives. Spanning decades, their friendship was characterized by Hauberg's provision of patronage for Tobey, who created works of art for her and taught her about the Bahá'í Faith, a resource that guided her for the rest of her life.

Finally, we have interspersed some very fine poems throughout the volume: Jack McLean's elegiac "Afternoon with Roger," a tribute to late Bahá'í poet Roger White; Emari DiGiorgio's deeply evocative "Elegy for the Old Thinking"; and Caitlin Johnson Castelaz's wonderfully metaphysical piece "Good News."

WORKS CITED

- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Promulgation of Universal Peace*. 2nd ed., Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982.
- Shoghi Effendi. *The Promised Day is Come*. Rev. ed., Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980.